

[Mrs. Isabel Barnwell]

25988 ? ? ? ? ?

February 6, 1939.

Mrs. Isabel Barnwell, (85)

2116 Pearl Place,

Jacksonville,

Florida.

([Correct?] name)

(Early School-teacher

Nassau County).

Rose [Shepherd?] - writer.

MRS. ISABEL BARNWELL, SCHOOL TEACHER.

We had an appointment at 2:30, and [as?] I rang the bell I peered through the latched screen door and saw Mrs. Barnwell [in?] the writing desk in the plain, but comfortably furnished living room. It is unusual for any door to be locked in the bungalow, and as she welcomed me, after unlatching the door, I said:

“Afraid somebody will carry you off?”

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"Oh, no. I learned not to [be?] afraid years ago. It's just that the wind is blowing rather strong today, and the screen [stood?] half open all the time, so I latched it.

"Well, it has been a long time since you were here, and I have thought of so many things about the old place." (She referred to her old family home, a Spanish [grant?] in Nassau County, the deed for which has been in the hands of her family since 1792).

She seated herself in a comfortable position on the wicker lounge, arranging the cushions about her back and shoulders, [with?] her left leg half on the lounge. Mrs. Barnwell is a cripple. An accident to her left knee resulted in a stiff joint, so that the limb [does?] not [bend?] when she sits down. This [corner?] is her favorite resting place when she [reads?] or gives an interview.

"You take the old black rocker, so you can write, and we'll have a good old time," she said, laughing.

"Why all the new cushions?"

"I had an old feather-bed — my folks don't like [feathers?] to sleep on, they would rather have inner-springs - so I took the 2 feathers, got some red [sprangled cretonne?] and made new cushions all 'round. See in the dining room?"

Sure enough, all the rockers, and there were three of them in front of the wide fire-place, had fat feather cushions in both the seats and backs. The family has grown smaller by one in the past year, a beloved son, Woodward, a Government aviation [instructor?], having lost his life in a glider accident on [Fernandina?] Beach in May, 1937. The dining table is shoved against the wall. Three places are indicated - for mother, daughter (a stenographer in public work at the Windsor [Hotel?]), and the daughter-in-law, Belle, who makes her home here since being widowed.

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"Yes, Belle is with us now, and we are glad to have her, it is not so lonesome. She is a receptionist - what a new-fangled name for office work! - in Dr. Spencer's private hospital. The Government pays her Woodward's pension of \$10.00 a month, and she makes \$15.00/ a week at the doctor's. Of course, she cannot contribute much to me, but we manage.

I remarked how well Mrs. Barnwell was looking, her eyes bright, and lighting up so readily.

"Yes, I have much to be thankful for. (No one has ever heard her complain about her stiff knee, although when she goes out she has to lean heavily on a cane). My health is good for one of my age, and I feel fine. My son in California just sent me a bottle of a thousand/ yeast pills and I have been taking them for a month or so. They sure do pep you up. Vitamines - everybody had gone vitamin-crazy, you know. My son said they helped him, too, he is an old man [now?], fifty-five."

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I concealed a smile by sneezing, and she went on:

"[Can?] you drive a car?"

I came [near?] strangling at this remark, as I told her, I was very sorry; that I had never had the ambition to own or drive an automobile, hence had never learned to operate one.

"I cannot understand how I have reached the age I have and not learned. An automobile is a handy thing. I had the opportunity to buy one at a bargain - you know Woodward left me a little insurance. Its a V-8, right out here in the garage in good condition, and if you could drive it, we'd go over to New Hope (name of her plantation in Nassau County) right now. It's early, and we would have plenty of time. My girls do not drive, although they are learning, but are afraid in heavy traffic or on long journeys, so when [we?] do go out in it, I have to run all over the neighborhood to [ferret?] out a driver."

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I explained I wanted some information about her early [experiences?] as a school-teacher, as a comparison with present-day educational matters.

“My mother and her people, the Gunbys, were educated in St. Marys, Georgia. There wasn't any [sarnandina?] them - that section was only a plantation, belonging to Don Domingo Fernandez. Later Mr. Fernandez set aside a portion of land for a town. It was laid out and called ‘Fernandina’ for his family. (Stephen Fernandez married my mother's sister, [Eliza?] Gunby. They had four childred - all dead now). Mother went to school to Mr. Church, in St Marys. “Aunt Eliza died and Uncle Stephen gave his children to my father and mother to raise, and there were eleven of us.

“Mother was the best speller in Mr. Church's school. She and my father were married November 8, 1930, in St. Marys. They 4 came to Fernandina to live. When the children began to be of an age that they needed instruction other than my mother could give, a [Miss?] Matilda [Meton?], daughter of an early settler of Old Town, was secured as our teacher.

“My father built a house of logs - two rooms - near the ‘big house’, as it was called, and this was our family school house.

“When the boys became larger, my father thought best to place them under a man teacher. So he wrote Lord and [Taylor?], in New York City, with whom he did a great deal of business, to secure a tutor for his sons. In course of time, they sent down a Mr. Lincoln, a cousin of Abraham Lincoln. He staid until along in the late 1850's, becoming homesick, he returned to New York. Then father hired a Mr. Boise. He staid a little over two years, but when it seemed war was imminent, he, too, returned to New York, where he expected to join the troops. He was my first teacher.

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"When Mr. Lincoln and Mr. [Beise?] were teaching us children, some of the neighbors' boys came to school also: Col. Cooper's son, Walter [Coachman?], General [Finngan's?] boy, the sons of the Ogilvie's (the family kept the drawbridge at Amelia River).

"When my brother, James, was sufficiently advanced through instruction from Mr. Lincoln and Mr. [Boise?], he went to Harvard. My brother, John, went to College in [Schenectady?] N. Y., my sister, [?] Tudy, (Mrs. Bacon), went to a girls' school at Milledgeville, Georgia; my sister, [Mary?], went to Athens, Georgia to a college there, and my sister, Florence, attended Troy [Female?] Seminary in Troy, New York. Miss Frances Willard was then the Principal. She later became famous in the Women's Christian 5 temperance Union. She was a brilliant woman, and her school was considered the finest girls' school in the United States. There is no doubt she was in advance of her time, and later became a model as an [example?] of women's rights. My sister was a graduate of this school.

"When the war came on, John was at school in [Schencnectady?], Florence in Troy, Mary, (Dr. Daniel's wife) and Tudy (Mrs. Bacon) were married.

"John and [Florence?] were terribly alarmed, as lines were closed and thy were fearful of getting back to Fernandina safely, and it was necessary for them to make arrangements for their return hurriedly. They got in touch some way with Mr. Lincoln, their early teacher, and he provided a way through the west, a long tedious route, by which they finally reached home in safety.

"When matters became unsettled in Fernandina, with [Federal?] gunboats in the harbor, my father took us and all the slaves to middle Florida, Hamilton County, near White Springs, where we I lived in plenty and unmolested all during the terrible period.

" I just remember, Col. Cooper's son was [named?] John; the [Coachman?] boy was young Walter, Gen. [Finegan's?] son was Ford, and the Ogilvie's son Dave.

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"A funny incident about Dave, which gave him a nickname he always [bore?], was when Mr. Boise asked him one day to write a composition. He asked, "About what?" Mr. Boise said, 'About something you know about. Don't try to write about something away off that you have never seen.' Well Dave, who was about fifteen, brought in his essay on the 'Cow.' He told all he could think of, and wound up with - 'One of Daddy's cows is on the lift.'

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Mr. Boise ask him what he meant, and he answered, 'she's down and can't get up, even if she would.' Everybody laughed, and after that Dave was dubbed 'Woudn't if he could, and couldn't if he would.'

"All of [those?] boys boarded with us, and we also took care of the teacher. The boys came from across the river, some as far away as twenty miles, so they stayed with us until each week end.

"As my father had his eleven children, the Fernandez' four children, and the four extra boys, and the tutor, it made a school of [nearly?] twenty. I was young, just learning my ABC's. I still have four picture cards given me as 'reward of Merit' for good scholarship and deportment.

"As I said, in April, 1861, we refugeed to Hamilton County. My sister, Florence, taught us. She was a most wonderful young woman - well educated, good looking, poised, intelligent and accomplished. As there were no schools in Hamilton County during that period and she felt sorry for other youngsters in that section, she persuaded father to let her [have one?] of the [negro?] houses which she had cleaned up, white-washed and [made?] into a [very?] presentable schoolroom.

"My brother, John o'Neill, was a Colonel in the Confederate Army; James acted as a [Commissariat?]; Isador was in the artillery and took part in the Battle of [Olustee?], and

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my brother, Dunbar, was with the Army of Virginia, Lee's troops in Virginia. Dr. R.P. [Daniel?], who [married?] my first cousin, Evelyn Fernandez, and Dr. Henry Bacon, my sister Tudy's husband, were also with the Confederate troops. Their children were with us and had to be educated, so eventually, sister Florence had quite a school, 32 pupils in all.

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"One of the girls, a Miss Mary [Mosely?], came from quite a distance away, and she boarded at my father's house. She had a piano, and brought it along, too, so that Florence could give her music lessons, for which service [those?] who wished could have the privilege of also practicing on the piano. You see, we had a [lovely?] grand piano in the old home at Fernandina, but we had to flee for our lives, gathering what few personal belongings we could, [father?] and the slaves taking care of the farming machinery, and [sad?] to say, when we returned after the War, not a piece of furniture was in the house - piano and all were gone. So we were glad to have Miss Mosely's piano in our new home. Music was a delight to all of us, and we four sisters used to sing a great deal. My older sister, Mary, had a voice like [Galli Curci?]. It was wonderful to hear her in solos.

"We kept up with the music of the times, having quite a stock of sheet music on hand, all of which had been sent from the Music Department of Lord & Taylor's in New York.

"My mother took particular care of our music, as it was expensive, and when she had sufficient quantities to make a bound volume, this was shipped to New York to the same firm, and returned to us, so that it would be better taken care of. I have several of those old volumes now, one composed entirely of Jenny [Lind's?] [repertoire?] when she made her long-remembered American appearance.

"But to get back to school; Florence would gather the children in the neighborhood each morning and bring them [?] the day, returning them to their homes at night. She kept this up for the four-year period of the War, and not a cent was charged any of the parents.

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"Yes, we had the old blue-back speller, and she taught us to 7 read and write well, and of course, we had spelling and arithmetic. When we got older, we also learned algebra, chemistry, and she taught the girls music and French. She tried to teach me Latin, but it didn't 'take' for some reason, but I learned to speak French readily. We had philosophy, and all the higher branches, as we reached the age to learn such studies. We did not have any blackboards, but each pupil had a big slate on which we wrote with slate-pencils. These seem to have gone out in the last few years, being classed as 'unsanitary' and children nowadays write altogether with pencils and pens.

"After the war, when we returned to Fernandina, my sister, Mrs. Bacon and my sister, Florence o'Neill, opened a school for young ladies in General [Finegan's?] old home, and taught quite [successfully?] for one year. Then Bishop Young, the [Episcepal?] Bishop of this [Disease?], realizing the possibilities of a well established girls' school in this section, came to Fernandina and equipped this same old house, the Finegan home, as a select boarding-school for young ladies. It was right where the school house is today, on the very same site.

"I was about fourteen then. My sister went to [Beaufort?], S. C. after she married a cousin of my future husband - B. W. Barnwell - and I went with her and studied two years at Beaufort. They had three children, all of whom are living in New York City.

"Later she and Mr. Barnwell moved to Abbeville, S. C., and then to [Suwannee?], Tennessee, where she still taught - coaching the young men at the [Suwannee?] University. She educated three boys, by getting them scholarships there. One was my son, James o'Neill Barnwell, who now lives in Beverly Hills, California.

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"She also educated her own children at [Suwannee?]. When she and Mrs. Bacon had the girls' school in Fernandina, it was full of young ladies of other families, who were glad to avail themselves of high class tuition.

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"Did we ever try to teach the Negroes on the plantation? Yes, we did. If they were interested, we taught them to read, [write?] and spell, but it had to be done [surreptitiously?]. I do not know whether there was a State law, or if it was just not considered the proper thing to do, but it is a fact, we taught them on the sly, for fear of being criticized.

"Mr. Barnwell, in South Carolina, used to teach his [Negroes?] when he had any who would study.

"The young people of that time were raised under strict discipline. I remember one day John Cooper, and his sister, [son?] and daughter of General Cooper, now grown, came over on horseback. They were dressed in riding clothes, blouse and [knickerbockers?], and were lounging on the steps of the wide porch, when my father who had been riding around the plantation on his favorite mount - 'Adelaide' - rode up, and saw them. He said 'How is this? John, you and your sister mount your horses, go home and get properly dressed, and when you come back [we?] will be very happy to see you, and have you stay to dinner.'

"This is quite a contrast to the way in which young people get away with manners and deportment now, running around in bathing suits, shorts, and what-not, all half naked, and nobody to object by a word, to our heathenish dressing!

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"I forgot to say that when my father settled in the early days at St. Marys with his mother and two sisters, Mrs. Shaw, [who?] was the daughter of Nathaniel Greene, lived at 'dungeness' twelve miles from Fernandina, an old plantation, the land having been granted to General Green for distinguished service in the [Revolutionary?] war. Mrs. Shaw had a nephew, James Nightingale, who was not inclined to study. She came to St. Marys and begged my grandmother to let her have my father, Henry o'Neill, as a companion to young Nightingale, thinking it might cause him to take more interest in his studies. She had

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a tutor brought from England, and my father studied under him at 'dungeness' for eight years, so he was well educated, and he saw that all of his children had a good education. The school-house was at 'dungeness' for several years after the war, so was our old school-room at New Hope. But they are all gone now.

“Bishop Young's Seminary at Fernandina prospered. He had the very best [teachers?] he could secure - one was a Miss Fuller, and another, a Miss [Steney?]. He also asked my sister, Florence, to become a member of his staff, but she married shortly afterwards and [went?] to live in Beaufort, S. C. It was more of a finishing school, although he [took?] a select class of younger girls, intermediates.

“This was about 1870. The school became well known, with a splendid reputation for scholarship and high class objectives in learning and Christian influence. The school was located, as I said before, on old Center Street, now Atlantic Avenue. On the same site now is a public school.

“When my husband and I moved back to Fernandina from Savannah in 1888, after my mother's death, a Mrs. [Ellis?] came to mae and said 10 we could get a public school at o'Neill, the/ Railroad Station named for our family, if I would agree to teach. So a man came from [Tallahassee?], connected with the department of Education, and conducted a sort of institute for a month. I qualified, and was granted a certificate to teach the school. In the course of the seven years I taught here, the school grew in attendance so that it had to be enlarged twice - new rooms being added on to the original room in the form of a 't'. Some children walked four miles twice a day to attend. Everybody brought lunch from home. There were no fancy lunch baskets, thermos jugs, or waxed paper. Just plain bread and meat, with cookies, and sometimes cake and pie. No, we had no hot drinks. I always carried a jug of water from New Hope, as tit is the best water in the world. We did not have a 10 a.m recess - just the hour for lunch. And in the afternoon, we left as soon as I could finish my twenty classes - you see I had all grades primer to the advanced, and it was

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generally about three o'clock when the last class was over. It was most interesting work, and I was known as 'the great teacher of Nassau County.'

"I wanted my son, Woodward, to be well educated, so when he was far enough advanced, I taught him and two young ladies, Miss Church and Miss Davis, advanced studies like Philosophy, English History, French, and other of the higher branches. The girls, Carrie Church and Bessie Davis, had only one book between them in the physiology class, studying together. One day Carrie said: "Do you believe all the lies in 'that book?' and Bessie answered: 'shucks! 'Course I do.' So I was surprised one day when Carrie Church said: 'mrs. Barnwell, there is a training class for nurses in Jacksonville. Do you think I could qualify?' I told her to put in most of her time on Physiology. She did, and later became one of the first nurses in the old St. Luke's Hospital. She married a Mr. Dodge and I never heard of her after she left Jacksonville.

"The county superintendent of schools was Mr. L. L. Owens, and he used to come and give the examinations. They were oral, as written examinations did not come in until several years later.

"I remember one time Mr. Owens said, 'If you keep up an average of 80% attendance, we will give you two months extra. I would go two or three miles out of my way on rainy mornings to pick up the children and get them to school, so as to maintain the required average. The school-house was 50 yards from the station. I would leave home about 8:15 a. m. with Woodward, in a one-seated buggy, and my horse - 'Lady', would trot me to the school-house in seven minutes. She was high spirited, and so happy, it seemed to me, in getting me to school on time, that sometimes she would jump straight up! One time she ran [away?] - but that's another story.

"On leaving the school-house schoolhouse after a hard day's work, I would go back to the old plantation and do another day's work in the latter afternoon and evening - cooking

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supper, getting ready for the next day, and on Saturday I would go to town with butter, eggs, vegetables, etc., to sell.

“After the war, my father hired hands to work the fields - paying the Negro men [50?] cents per day and the women, 50¢. [For?] twelve years he cultivated truck, selling quantities of vegetables - carrots, cabbage, tomatoes, sweet potatoes, white potatoes, green corn, cucumbers. The land would grow anything, it was [so?] fertile.

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“We had a large packing house near the wharf on Amelia Island where the vegetables were stored. A freighter called once a week, and the truck was loaded onto two flats (flatboats) and swung alongside the ship where they were unloaded into the hold.

“Did I have any trouble disciplining pupils? Well, yes, I had one experience I will never forget. As a rule the children were anxious to learn and were very tractable, but there was a Holiness family moved into that section, they were styled ‘Jumpers’ a fanatical sect - and the father said so much [learning?] was dangerous and sinful. One of his sons tried to choke me one day, and in our struggle pulled out a handful of my hair, but I finally [conquered?] him, and told him he could not come back, or I would expel him. It did not matter much, however, as there was only one more week of school. Some of the country people did not care much for [an?] education. The children would say - ‘my father and mother do not know how to read and write, and they make a good living.’

“I used to talk to my pupils about the value of and education and would tell them - ‘If you write a letter and it is properly written and the words spelled correctly, people will say - ‘that is an educated person.’ And ‘If you can figure, you can make yourself valuable in business,’ and similar [talks?].

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“Not long ago I [met?] a man [now?] living in Atlanta who went to my school at o'Neill Station, and he said: 'mrs. Barnwell, if I had only heeded all the talks you gave me, I would have been a great man.'

“What salary did I receive? At first, \$20.00 per month, which after four years was increased to [\$45.00?]. I furnished my own horse and buggy and drove the [3and?] one-half miles to o'Neill.”